

# More Contra-dictions

## Who did what to whom in the secret war?

**T**he tough talk sounded almost like it was meant for Ronald Reagan's enemies in Nicaragua—not his friends in Honduras. Ten days after the president's men raised the alarm about a major Sandinista raid into Honduras, they lashed out last week at a high-level Honduran official who claimed the incursion was "nothing out of the ordinary." The official told a group of reporters that Washington had exaggerated the incident to bolster the case for U.S. aid to the contras. He also said U.S. officials had pressured Tegucigalpa to ask for \$20 million in emergency military aid.

The administration quickly fired off a cable to Honduras asking for "clarification"; then it issued a sharp denial. "The allegations of U.S. pressure," said State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb, "are not true... [and] come as a surprise to us."

With the Americans, the Hondurans and the Nicaraguans all offering different accounts, the story of what happened on the Honduran border was still as muddy as the Coco River. In Washington, U.S. officials continued to insist the Sandinistas had launched an unprecedented assault on the Honduran-based contras. But in Teguci-

galpa, authorities said the raid was minor enough that their president and his top generals went to the beach after the attack. In Nicaragua, meanwhile, high-level military sources made the astonishing claim that they had informed Tegucigalpa about the incursion in advance and that Honduras had given them the go-ahead to strike. Because no independent observers witnessed the raid, sorting out the truth wasn't easy. But at the very least, the conflicting versions in the three capitals underlined the public-relations purposes that each of the players was trying to serve:

■ **Washington.** The administration's not-so-hidden agenda has been to persuade Congress to vote for \$100 million in U.S. aid for the contras. But because that objective has been transparent—and because Reagan's men have used so much overheated rhetoric in depicting the Sandinista menace—many congressmen and other Americans have been cynical about their rendition of the border incident. As it turns out, the administration was right about the scope of the raid. Last week military sources in Managua admitted that some 2,500 men were involved—500 more than even U.S. intelligence analysts had estimated. As for the behind-the-scenes dealings with Teguci-

galpa, Reagan aides firmly denied that the Honduran request for military assistance was coerced. But they conceded that Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams did demand that the Hondurans put that request on the record—and they conceded that he did so not just to conform with U.S. law but also to influence congressional voting on contra aid.

■ **Tegucigalpa.** The Hondurans have two very different problems: they are dependent on the United States but don't want to appear too dependent. And they give sanctuary to the contras but don't want to admit it. Given those concerns, their veracity was also suspect. According to the Honduran official who talked to American newsmen, it was U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Shepard Low-

man who demanded a meeting with Honduran President José Azcona Hoyo and Foreign Minister Carlos López Contreras to discuss the Nicaraguan incursion. He said Lowman insisted that the Hondurans ask for U.S. military aid and scolded them for their low-key response to the Sandinista raid. "We're here trying to help you, and you're going to leave us hanging in Washington," the official quoted Lowman as saying.

But in their accounts of U.S. arm-twisting, the Hondurans protested too much. One former cabinet officer with

close ties to the Honduran military painted a questionable picture of official nonchalance, even after the United States had dispatched 14 American helicopters to carry 600 Honduran troops to the border. "The chief of the Air Force was sunbathing at a resort, watching the sky as American helicopters flew overhead," the source said. "The generals went to the beach. The president went to the beach." In a television address, Azcona also insisted that he had sought U.S. help "without internal or external pressure." No doubt, there was a grain of truth to what the other Honduran officials said: the administration was manifestly eager to dramatize the Sandinista threat. But it was also likely that they exaggerated the pressure in order to create an appearance of independence from Washington and to sup-

port their fiction that the contras aren't in Honduras.

■ **Managua.** By launching the raid in the first place, the Sandinistas were trying to frighten U.S. congressmen and Honduran officials about the prospect of a widening war. That motive was evident in the threats that Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega made after the raid. He warned that "to the extent that American troops are involved in helping the mercenary forces, American officers, military advisers and helicopters will be running the same risks as the mercenary forces." In a bid to "rattle" Honduras, as one Western diplomat in Managua put it, Ortega also said the Sandinistas would mount "defensive operations" into any area where the contras are based. "So long as there is an aggressive force trying to invade our territory," he said, "we

will continue to defend our territory from our border line."

Ortega's scare tactics aren't likely to work on Capitol Hill. Most lawmakers see through them, and Congress will probably approve a contra-aid package this month. But how the Hondurans will respond is less clear. When the Contadora group (the Latin nations seeking a peaceful settlement to the Nicaraguan conflict) met over the weekend in Panama, the Hondurans were expected to reject a Sandinista proposal for a "border commission" to police the area

between Nicaragua and Honduras. But Tegucigalpa is growing increasingly distressed about the human and economic cost of harboring the contras, and U.S. officials fret privately that it may be losing its stomach for the conflict. To keep the contras alive, Reagan now has to worry about more than winning votes in Congress. He also has to persuade the jittery Hondurans that their wounds of war are worth it.

MARK WHITAKER with JOHN WALCOTT in Washington, LIZ BALMASEDA in Tegucigalpa and SCOTT WALLACE in Managua